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ABSTRACT

Behavioral and perceptual differences among maritally distressed and nondistressed husbands and wives were investigated. Distressed couples beginning marital therapy and nondistressed couples solicited through community newspapers comprised the criterion groups which were matched for major demographic variables. Couples first enacted and then repeatedly observed and rated videotaped samples of their own marital conflict resolution. Between the ratings, a discrimination task was completed which consisted of subjects observing and rating two standardized videotapes of "good" and "bad" dyadic problem solving. Results indicate that distressed and nondistressed couples do significantly differ in their demonstration of communication skills associated with marital conflict resolution. Married individuals rated most accurately and consistently the negative verbal behavior emitted by their spouses, and they rated self-emitted negative behavior poorly. Distressed partners seemed to discriminate and rate positive problem solving behaviors at least as well as the nondistressed partners. Distressed wives were most reliable and accurate in rating their own (relatively low) output of positive verbal and nonverbal behavior. Results suggest that certain behavioral differences observed between "clinical" and "normal" couples during conflict resolution may not relate as much to distressed partners' inability to discriminate appropriate behaviors as to their inability or unwillingness to engage in them. (Author)

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Perceptual Biases of Distressed and Nondistressed Marital Partners Concerning Conflict Resolution*

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Perceptual Biases of Distressed and Nondistressed
Marital Partners Concerning Conflict Resolution

Gary R. Birchler

Introduction

The present study investigated the behavioral and perceptual differences among maritally distressed and nondistressed husbands and wives. Subjects first enacted and then repeatedly observed and rated 5-minute videotaped samples of their own marital conflict resolution. Between the repeated ratings a discrimination training task was completed, which consisted of subjects observing and rating two standardized, 5-minute videotapes of "good" and "bad" dyadic problem solving.

The behavioral formulation of marital dysfunction (cf. Jacobson, in press; Weiss, 1978 for comprehensive reviews) and a number of normative assessment studies clearly support a communication deficit model of marital distress, particularly in the context of problem solving (Birchler, 1977; Birchler, Weiss & Vincent, 1975; Gottman, Notarius, Markman, Bank & Yoppi, 1976; Vincent, Weiss & Birchler, 1975). Taken together, these studies suggest that in the laboratory setting, the communication skills of distressed and nondistressed couples are best discriminated when couples are asked to engage in conflict resolution tasks involving high relevancy and moderate to high conflict potential. In the present study, couples selected their own moderate- to high-conflict marital problems for discussion.

The study incorporated two major and several minor hypotheses. Given that valid distressed-nondistressed criterion groups were obtained, the first major hypothesis was that the nondistressed, relative to distressed couples, would emit significantly higher rates of facilitative, positive behavior and lower rates of nonfacilitative, negative behavior during conflict resolution. Such findings would certainly not be new in the behavioral literature, but with respect to the

present samples, such objective behavioral differences between groups are preferred if not required before the remaining hypotheses can be adequately tested.

The most interesting hypothesis concerned the phenomenon of negative bias with respect to subjects' perceptions of self and spouse performance during conflict resolution. Distressed couples have been described as (1) maintaining a "negative scanning bias" concerning marital interaction (Stuart, 1969); (2) engaging in reciprocal exchanges of "cross-complaints" (Gottman et al., 1976); and (3) persisting in attribution of blame for marital dissatisfaction to one's partner instead of to the relationship (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Moreover, several group comparison assessment studies, including short-term reciprocity analyses, have suggested a strong tendency for distressed and some tendency for nondistressed spouses to be particularly sensitive and reactive to their partners' negative emitted behaviors during conflict resolution (cf. Jacobson, in press for research review).

Accordingly, based on the available research and the author's fairly extensive clinical experience, the following prediction was made. All subjects, when faced with marital conflict, will be disposed to negative scanning and blaming attribution. They will therefore demonstrate perceptual accuracy for spouse-emitted negative behaviors, but not for self-emitted negative behaviors.

Several related hypotheses were ventured. They are based largely on clinical speculation and are generally devoid of previous empirical investigation. A third prediction was that nondistressed partners, by virtue of their marital satisfaction, positive cognitive sets and positive expectancies, would more accurately monitor and rate positive problem solving behaviors than would distressed partners. The latter, as a group, would more likely be handicapped by the negative bias phenomenon and by habitual inattention to relatively low exchange rates of positive behaviors.

The fourth and fifth hypotheses were quite related. The fourth predicted that wives, through social learning, would better discriminate and accurately rate supportive, socio-emotional behaviors than their husbands. In contrast, the fifth hypothesis predicted that husbands would more accurately discriminate and rate instrumental, Problem Solution behavior than their wives. These latter hypotheses have received indirect support in clinical work. It is not uncommon for husbands to respond to wives' sometimes vague requests for support and understanding by offering advice and emphasizing task oriented solutions. In addition, wives more often complain of husbands' lack of attention to socio-emotional issues than vice versa and husbands traditionally perceive more responsibility for decision making and problem solving in the relationship (though these sex-role behaviors may be changing among younger married couples). In any case, for the present samples, hypotheses 4 and 5 are plausible.

Finally, two general experimental inquiries concerned the differential effects of discrimination training (i.e., having couples observe and rate simulated "good" and "bad" segments of marital problem solving), and whether there would be agreement between husbands and wives on self and spouse perceptions.

Method

Subjects. Twenty eight distressed couples beginning marital therapy and thirty four nondistressed couples solicited through community newspapers comprised the criterion groups, which were matched for major demographic variables. The distressed couples met three criteria: (1) they sought marital therapy, were evaluated and accepted for treatment in a VA Hospital Mental Health Clinic; (2) they volunteered to participate in the assessment study and (3) they obtained an averaged couple Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (LWMAS) score of less than 95 (Locke & Wallace, 1959).

In comparison, the nondistressed couples met the following criteria: (1) they responded to a newspaper ad seeking participants for a marital interaction research project; (2) they indicated they had been married for more than one year, had neither separated nor received marital counseling, and they considered themselves happily married; (3) they obtained an averaged couple LWMAS score in excess of 105. Nondistressed couples who completed the study were paid $25.00. Midway through recruitment, nondistressed couples were screened for appropriate age levels to match the distressed sample.

The final groups did not significantly differ in major demographic variables, both groups averaging approximately 38 years old, 12 years marriage, 2.6 children, husbands had 14.5 years of education, wives 13 years of education. On the other hand, the two groups were significantly different in levels of distress, based on their subjective reports and several paper and pencil inventories. For example, the LWMAS couple scores averaged 118 for the nondistressed and 70 for the distressed samples ($p < .001$).

Procedure. As part of a larger study all couples completed several inventories and engaged in 10- minute samples of marital conflict resolution. Lists of the couples' marital problems were made up from the Areas of Change Questionnaire (cf. Weiss & Margolin, 1977) and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale. Couples were asked to indicate (or add to their lists) those

items having particular relevance for discussion. Subjects then independently rank-ordered the updated items for importance and the experimenter made up 4 X 6 cards indicating the four most important marital conflict items: two each from husband's and wife's lists. Couples were then instructed to spend about 10 minutes discussing one or more of their problems and to attempt to come to a joint resolution. The samples of communication were videotaped while the experimenter left the room and observed on a monitor.

Following collection of the samples, couples were given detailed instructions in how to complete the Video Interaction Rating Scale (VIRS). The VIRS is comprised of five items; four represent major summary categories taken from the Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS) (Hops, Wills, Patterson & Weiss, 1972). The MICS is a 29 code scoring system designed for trained coders to assess verbal and nonverbal behaviors relevant to effective marital communication and problem solving. The four constellations of MICS behavior couples were asked to monitor and rate during videotape playback were: Problem Solution (e.g., proposing a solution, suggesting a compromise); Negative Verbal (e.g., complaining, criticizing, denying responsibility, disagreeing); Positive Verbal (e.g., approval, agreement, use of humor); and Positive Nonverbal (e.g., smiling, laughing, positive head nodding). The fifth VIRS item asked subjects to indicate how representative the laboratory interaction was to problem solving discussions they might have had during the previous week. For each VIRS question, subjects were asked to indicate on a five point scale (ranging from "not at all" to "a great deal"), the degree to which they observed husband and wife engaging in the specified behaviors.

Videotape Playback. Following familiarization with the VIRS, each couple first observed and rated the initial five minutes of their previously recorded communication sample. Second, to provide an opportunity for discrimination training, all couples observed and rated two standardized five-minute videotapes depicting

"good" and "poor" problem solving communication. The training tapes, presented in counterbalanced order, were made by role players to simulate "distressed" and "nondistressed" marital problem solving. Third, couples once again observed and rated the five-minute segment of their own marital communication. Finally, couples were debriefed as to the nature of the experiment and dismissed.

Results

Levels of Distress. There is little doubt that the two groups differed in level of distress. The distressed couples had entered marital therapy; the nondistressed had never sought counseling. The mean Locke-Wallace scores for the distressed and nondistressed couples were 70 and 118, respectively ($t = 10.08$, $p < .001$). The total couple conflict scores from the Areas of Change Questionnaire (Weiss & Birchler, 1975) averaged 27 and 9 items for these distressed and nondistressed couples ($t = 7.23$, $p < .001$). Finally, large subsamples of these groups (20 distressed and 32 nondistressed couples) recorded at home, the frequencies of pleasing and displeasing activities for a seven day period. Results indicated significant differences in the expected directions for numbers of pleasing and displeasing behaviors. In sum, several sources of data validate divergence between the criterion groups.

Lab Sample Validity. The representativeness of partners' discussion in the laboratory compared to their interaction at home was assessed by couples' responses to Question 5 of the VIRS. Nondistressed couples rated their five-minute laboratory interaction "Quite A Bit" representative of similar discussions at home ($\bar{X} = 3.70$, 5-point scale); distressed couples rated their interaction at least "A Fair Amount" representative ($\bar{X} = 3.29$). Thus, both groups indicated their discussions were fairly representative of interaction at home.

Hypothesis 1. All couples' 10-minute videotaped interactions were scored by trained observers using the Marital Interaction Coding System (Hops, Wills, Patterson & Weiss, 1972). Each communication sample was coded by two observers blind to experimental conditions. Percentage agreement reliability ranged from 78% to 95%. For the present study, the first five minutes of interaction was analyzed and behaviors were expressed in terms of frequency counts (rates/minute) for each of four MICS summary categories: Problem Solution, Negative Verbal, Positive Verbal and Positive Nonverbal.

Hypothesis 1 predicted significant differences between distressed and nondistressed marital interaction regarding all four categories. Table 1 presents the results. Independent t-tests indicated significant differences in 7 of 8 comparisons. The only exception concerned Problem Solution behaviors emitted by distressed and nondistressed men.

Effects of Training Tapes. Table 2 presents the mean VIRS scores for distressed and nondistressed males and females. These mean self and spouse ratings were made before and after subjects viewed the "good" and "bad" training tapes.

Inspecting the Table, one can see that there were virtually no effects due to training nor was there evidence of practice effects due to subjects rating the same segments twice. Surprisingly, of 32 pre- and post-training comparisons, only one possible difference emerged at the $p < .05$ level. Distressed wives slightly downgraded their performance of positive nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smiles, head nods, positive touching), but this difference may be due to chance.

These results suggest that either subjects were initially good raters and remained uninfluenced by what they observed on the very different training tapes, or they were making few if any behavioral discriminations at all. Inspection of subjects' VIRS ratings of the training tapes (no table presented) and further study of Table 2 indicate that the former interpretation is most likely the case. First, both nondistressed and distressed couples, without question, rated

the models' "bad" and "good" performances of overall positive and negative behaviors significantly different. Second, if subjects were making general discriminations, their VIRS mean scores should reflect the pattern of differences obtained in the MICS analysis. While statistical tests are not yet available, inspection of Table 2 indicates no instances of mean VIRS scores in unexpected directions when distressed and nondistressed subjects' ratings are compared. Taken together, these findings suggest that as groups, the subjects were able to make generally valid discriminations, given the retrospective self-report methodology provided.

Finally, the data in Table 2 indicate that husbands and wives were in solid agreement concerning one another's performances. Only one instance of disagreement emerged. Nondistressed husbands rated their wives' Problem Solution behavior significantly higher than their wives rated themselves (means = 3.71 and 3.21, respectively, $t = 2.08$, $p < .05$). Again, this finding may be chance related.

Perceptual Accuracy. In the present study, the more objective MICS behavioral ratings were defined as the basic standards of performance. Thus, for the data presented in Tables 3 and 4, within group analyses were performed by correlating subject's VIRS scores with the actual emitted rate-per-minute behaviors derived from comparable MICS summary categories. Perceptual accuracy was defined as the presence of significant correlation coefficients.

In order to test the remaining hypotheses, it was decided to rely primarily on the data in Table 4, since presumably after training, subjects were more practiced and sensitized to the potential differences between good and poor communication skills. However, it should be noted that while there were a few differences between subjects' perceptual accuracy scores before and after training (Table 3 vs. Table 4), the pattern of results was generally replicated across rating sessions.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that partners would more accurately perceive and rate their spouses' negative verbal behavior than their own. The hypothesis was basically confirmed. Following minimal training, all four groups were able to accurately rate their spouses' negative verbal behavior, and conversely they were unable to accurately rate their own. Interestingly, the data in Tables 3 and 4 suggest that only nondistressed females accurately and consistently rated self-emitted negative verbal behavior.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that nondistressed, relative to distressed partners, would be more accurate raters concerning the positive conflict resolution behavioral categories. Such was not the case. Following training, distressed partners were significantly accurate raters on 4 of 12 opportunities, compared to nondistressed partners on 3 of 12 opportunities. In sum, there was a tendency for the distressed partners, both before and after training, to perceive positive performances more accurately than nondistressed partners.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that wives, in general, would more accurately perceive and rate positive socio-emotional behavior than their male counterparts. The data is equivocal on this matter. Concerning self-perception of positive nonverbal behavior, wives in general were consistently accurate raters, while their husbands were not. Moreover, distressed wives also perceived self-emitted positive verbal behavior accurately, while other groups did not. On the other hand, wives in general were not able to accurately rate their husbands' positive socio-emotional behavior. In contrast, distressed husbands were accurate on their wives' positive nonverbal behavior both before and after training.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that husbands, in general would more accurately discriminate instrumental (PS) behaviors than their wives. This hypothesis was not confirmed. Following training, husbands were accurate raters in two of four conditions. Nondistressed males rated themselves accurately, while distressed

males rated their wives accurately. However, the wives performed about as well. Nondistressed females rated their husbands' problem solution performance accurately; distressed females almost did so too (.351 = p .07). A similar contradiction to this hypothesis is noted in Table 3. Thus, there is no clear evidence that husbands rate PS behavior better than their wives.

Discussion

The major findings from having nondistressed and distressed partners enact, observe and rate samples of their own conflict resolution process were that (1) employing the MICS, the expected differences in the conflict resolution behaviors demonstrated by these two groups were experimentally replicated, (2) married individuals, distressed or not, rated most accurately and consistently the negative verbal behavior emitted by their spouses, and they rated self-emitted negative behavior poorly, (3) distressed partners seemed to discriminate and rate positive problem solving behaviors at least as well as nondistressed partners, and (4) distressed females were most reliable and accurate in rating their own (relatively low) output of positive verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Overall, if we assume that the behavioral categories represented in the MICS are important for effective conflict resolution, then the general results indicate that couples do need help in learning how to identify certain classes of communication behavior (cf. Tables 3, 4). As predicted, subjects were quite able to discriminate and rate their partners' negative verbal behavior; perhaps they monitor too well. In contrast, with the possible exception of nondistressed wives, partners were not able to accurately rate self-emitted negative behavior. Concerning positive communication and problem solving, most partners did not appear able to "track" and rate these behaviors accurately in self or spouse. Interestingly, and unexpectedly, distressed couples demonstrated no more deficit for positive perceptual accuracy than the nondistressed couples. This finding, particularly if replicated, suggests that certain behavioral differences observed between "clinical" and "normal" couples

during conflict resolution may not relate as much to distressed partners' inability to discriminate appropriate behaviors, as to their inability or unwillingness to engage in them. Thus, discrimination training may be a necessary but insufficient step in the remediation of marital distress.

The findings relevant to negative bias reinforce clinicians' experience that couples often come into therapy quite sensitive and reciprocally reactive to partners' negative behavior. Therapeutically it is important, if not critical, to get distressed partners to give up their persistent cognitive sets which attribute blame to spouse and deny self-responsibility for problems in the relationship. This cognitive shift in attribution toward relationship vs partners' dysfunction has been discussed by others in the literature (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Margolin & Weiss, 1978a; Weiss, 1978).

In retrospect, the lack of training effects in the present study following videotaped exposure to the "good" and "bad" models is not inconsistent with the experimental literature on the effects of videotape feedback. In the absence of focussed instructions and other training procedures (e.g., modeling, coaching and behavior rehearsal), videotape feedback has not been demonstrated to be an effective behavior change mechanism (e.g., Eisler, Hersen & Agras, 1973). A more innovative and apparently effective discrimination training program has been described by Margolin and Weiss (1978b) which features the use of electromechanical cueing and feedback procedures, along with therapist modeling and client behavior rehearsal of couple-defined communication deficits.

In conclusion there were some methodological limitations and conceptual constraints to the present study. The major limitation concerns generalizability of the findings. First, the group criterion method is designed to emphasize potential differences between groups. The distressed couples were seeking therapy and the nondistressed couples knew they were recruited because of their nondistressed status. Thus, the possibility of couples acting in ways consistent with their classification cannot be ruled out.

Second, the communication patterns, perceptual ratings and implications of the findings are limited to marital conflict resolution in an artificial laboratory setting. While an attempt was made to maximize the stimulus value of the environment and the relevancy and conflict potential of the discussion items, it is nevertheless speculative how representative the observed process was to couples' natural interaction.

Third, although this study is unique in the sense that it provides information on the extent to which couples can monitor and rate a variety of behavioral categories represented in the MICS, it does not provide information about the relative importance couples place on these behaviors. Further improvements in communication training programs will probably require increasing convergence between investigators' and clients' definition of the critical variables.

Finally, there were two major contributions of this study. It replicated previous findings that distressed and nondistressed couples do significantly differ in their demonstration of skills associated with marital conflict resolution. Also, the study provided evidence that marital partners, irrespective of levels of distress, maintain a perceptual bias which is sensitive to spouse-emitted, and insensitive to self-emitted negative verbal behavior. Therapeutic interventions designed to alter these patterns are emerging and must be further developed and validated.

TABLE 1

MEAN FREQUENCY COUNTS (RATES PER MINUTE) OF SUBJECTS' OBSERVED (MICS) BEHAVIORS DURING MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION DISTRESSED VS. NONDISTRESSED

	MALES		FEMALES	
	DISTRESSED	NONDISTRESSED	DISTRESSED	NONDISTRESSED
PROBLEM SOLUTION	.650	.718	.314	.649*
NEGATIVE VERBAL[1]	.693	.100*	.943	.194*
POSITIVE VERBAL	.557	.892*	.529	.975*
POSITIVE NONVERBAL[2]	.557	1.463*	.829	1.985*

1 = category scored omitting IN, DG — nondistressed n = 34

2 = category scored omitting AT — distressed n = 28

* $p < .01$ one-tailed independent t-test

TABLE 2

MEAN VIRS SCORES BASED ON SELF AND SPOUSE PERCEPTIONS,

PRE AND POST TRAINING FOR DISTRESSED AND NONDISTRESSED

MALES AND FEMALES[1]

		PERCEPTION OF SELF				PERCEPTION OF SPOUSE			
MICS Σ	TRAINING	MALE RESPONSES		FEMALE RESPONSES		MALE RESPONSES		FEMALE RESPONSES	
CATEGORY	CONDITION	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND
PROBLEM	PRE	2.64	3.32	2.82	3.21*	2.68	3.71*	2.75	3.41
SOLUTION	POST	2.75	3.12	2.71	3.21	2.57	3.67	2.57	3.39
NEGATIVE	PRE	2.36	1.82	2.43	1.79	2.61	1.53	2.43	1.85
VERBAL[2]	POST	2.18	1.61	2.68	1.71	2.46	1.39	2.79	1.76
POSITIVE	PRE	2.93	3.56	2.39	3.47	2.68	3.85	2.36	3.59
VERBAL	POST	2.68	3.42	2.64	3.36	2.43	3.70	2.43	3.45
POSITIVE	PRE	2.43	3.71	2.54 **	3.74	2.46	3.59	1.89	3.59
NONVERBAL[3]	POST	2.29	3.67	2.18	3.52	2.32	3.61	1.89	3.36

1 = significance tests not yet available for D vs. ND comparisons

2 = category scored omitting IN, DG

3 = category scored omitting AT

nondistressed n = 34

distressed n = 28

1

* Only significantly different rating between husbands and wives, t = 2.08, p = .04, two-tailed test

** Only significantly different rating pre to post training, t = 3.38, p = .002, dependent two-tailed test.

TABLE 3

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BASED ON SUBJECTS' INITIAL PERCEPTUAL RATINGS AND OBSERVED PERFORMANCES OF SELECTED MICS BEHAVIORS DURING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

MICS ∈ CATEGORY	PERCEPTION OF SELF				PERCEPTION OF SPOUSE			
	DISTRESSED		NONDISTRESSED		DISTRESSED		NONDISTRESSED	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
PROBLEM SOLUTION	.149	.351	.378*	.158	.405*	.404*	.126	.262
NEGATIVE VERBAL	.156	.145	.034	.343*	.575**	.622**	.480**	.105
POSITIVE VERBAL	.112	.371*	.189	-.023	.190	.120	.130	.131
POSITIVE NONVERBAL	.086	.663**	.120	.300*	.381*	.065	.181	.327*

nondistressed n = 34
distressed n = 28

* = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$

TABLE 4

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS BASED ON SUBJECTS' OBSERVED PERFORMANCES AND THEIR PERCEPTUAL RATINGS OF SELECTED MICS BEHAVIORS AFTER VIEWING CONTROL VIDEOTAPES

MICS ∈ CATEGORY	PERCEPTION OF SELF				PERCEPTION OF SPOUSE			
	DISTRESSED		NONDISTRESSED		DISTRESSED		NONDISTRESSED	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
PROBLEM SOLUTION	-.011	.073	.349*	.271	.423*	.351	-.080	.348*
NEGATIVE VERBAL	-.092	.009	.151	.441**	.548**	.494**	.439**	.524**
POSITIVE VERBAL	.091	.485**	.094	-.063	.216	.291	.155	.282
POSITIVE NONVERBAL	-.045	.640**	.125	.417*	.510**	.044	.238	.241

nondistressed n = 34
distressed n = 28

* = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$

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